

## A Wondrous Silence

Lenten Midweek #2 – 03/09/22 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Genesis 37:12-36 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 28 **“Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt.”**

### **I. Punished Unfairly**

✘ The punishment didn't fit the crime! As a matter of fact, what was Joseph guilty of? I mean, what did Joseph do that was so bad? What crimes had he committed? It's true, his father, Jacob (aka Israel), loved him more than his eleven brothers and gave him a robe of many colors. But, Joseph had no control over that.

→ And yes, he might have been wiser to keep the content of his dreams to himself. I mean he did himself no favors by telling his brothers about how their sheaves of grain bowed down to his sheaf of grain – or about how the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to him. Even his father rebuked Joseph for speaking this way. But that should have settled the matter. Everyone should have been able to move on. But they didn't. Joseph's brothers made the decision to ration out their own punishment – punishment that did not fit the crime.

✘ Sibling rivalry and fraternal jealousy; they can escalate and spiral out of control so easily. Sin, evil, and wickedness; they seem to have a tendency to snowball. Almost overnight, it seems, Joseph's brothers suddenly get to the point that they plan for his homicide. Initially premeditated murder in the first degree is casually tossed out for discussion: “Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams” (v. 20).

→ It's only a last-minute intervention by Reuben, the oldest brother that prevents them from killing their brother. Still, Joseph's brothers find a fate for him almost as bad as death – selling him into slavery for twenty shekels of silver. And then they break the heart of their old father by lying to him about the death of his “favorite” son. Talk about some cold, compassionless hearts – how could those brothers just stand there unmoved while the family patriarch weeps with a broken heart saying, “I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning” (v.35).

✘ But wait a minute folks, don't be too quick to condemn Joseph's brothers, because you know that you are more like them than you may care to admit. How many broken relationships, how many fractured friendships, can you count in your life? And how many of those started with what seems now to be a “little conflict” that quickly escalated into something more? That sort of thing seems to be our specialty, I'm afraid. All it takes is for us to feel slighted, disrespected, or treated unfairly and it's like we're belly-up to a poker table, *“I'll see your slight and raise you an insult. I'll put you in your place. I'll knock you down a notch or two to where you belong and take you for all you've got.”*

→ Or how many old parents do you know like Jacob whose children treat them treacherously through deceit and disrespect instead of by honoring, loving, and cherishing them? Yes, where sin is concerned, there's nothing new under the sun. Joseph's brothers would fit right in with our day and culture, because we're all a bunch of real-life soap opera stars, turning our Lord's stomach with all of our sin-drenched drama!

### **II. Joseph's punishment and God's silence**

✘ But I think what's most shocking in tonight's text is not the wickedness of man, but instead the silence of God. This family – with all their flaws and failures – they were the chosen people of

God. All of God's promises for life and salvation rested on them. According to God's promise, this family would one day, lead to the coming Christ. So why doesn't the Lord do something to stave off this shameful situation? Instead He does nothing!

→ Martin Luther calls this "a wondrous silence". He writes: "God lets it happen. He seems quietly still, sleeping, deaf and completely hardened. He has no compassion at all and acts as if He also didn't know this dear [Joseph]. All the angels are also silent as this treasure is snatched away to Egypt. ... What is God doing here with His chosen ones? ... What is this, that He forsakes ... them so miserably?" (Joel Baseley, trans., *Luther's Family Devotions for Every Day in the Church Year* [Dearborn, MI: Mark V Publications, 1996], 446).

✘ That's a very interesting question. Why does God allow this to happen? Why is He silent? Why doesn't He step in? Why didn't Jacob see the risk in sending Joseph up to Shechem to find his brothers? It wasn't a wise move.

→ And once Joseph gets to Shechem and can't find his brothers, who's the stranger who just happens to know that the brothers and their flocks had moved on to Dothan? If not for that stranger (or was he a stranger?), Joseph might have just turned around and gone back home. In which case he never would have been sold into slavery, never would have ended up in Egypt, never would have saved his family from famine. There would have been no Pharaoh, no Moses, no exodus.

→ Wow, it ends up that the entire Old Testament – the entire history of our salvation hinges on that stranger at Shechem who asked Joseph, "What are you seeking?" (v. 15) And God just lets it all happen; lets the tragedies and triumphs unfold without so much as lifting a finger. God is silent. Yet as we now know, it is a wondrous silence. And this silent God is our Lord; our God!

✘ Perhaps Paul had Joseph in mind when he wrote to the Romans in verse four of our Epistle reading this evening, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom. 15:4).

→ You see, this story of Joseph teaches us hope. He teaches us how to receive the silence of God in faith; still trusting that He remains our loving God who is in control. Who among us hasn't at some point wondered, "Where in the world is God?" When tragedy hits us, as temptation surrounds us, as conflict escalates and sin spirals out of control, where is God? I wouldn't be one bit surprised if Joseph asked this very question as the Ishmaelites hauled him off to Egypt. It's unfair! It's unjust! Yet for poor Joseph, this punishment doesn't fit the crime!

### III. Jesus' unfair punishment, met with God's silence

✘ You see, this is all for our comfort – especially since poor Joseph reminds us all of poor Jesus. What happened to Joseph is actually a foreshadowing of what would happen to Jesus. Thinking of how Joseph is thrown into the pit and sold into slavery and hauled into Egypt, Luther wrote this: "Joseph is dead and buried. He has his Good Friday. ... His father also dies but they are both raised again by the power of God who can even make the dead alive. The heart of the believer must yet live and rise again even if ten worlds bury him" (Baseley, 447).

→ Poor Joseph. His punishment is unfair and unjust – and there's no one to rescue and deliver him. A wondrous silence, that's all there is. It's not unlike the silence Jesus faced on Good Friday that moved Him to cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken Me?" (Mt. 27:46) Yes, the One who cries out from the cross – He, too, is a Son of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is our Brother!

→ Answer this: Jesus' punishment and crucifixion – does it fit the crime? His punishment is murder in the first degree. It's unfair and unjust. What was Jesus guilty of? Nothing! What did Jesus do that was so bad? Nothing! What crimes did Jesus commit? Not a single one! But Jesus hangs there with nails and thorns for all the crimes of all His brothers and sisters. For you ... for me.

✘ We do the crime and He gets the punishment. We do the sin and He gets the nails. We push Him away and He stretches His arms wide open to embrace us on a Roman tool of torture. He bears our sins so that we might have full and free forgiveness. He goes down into the pit of hell so that we might rise again to live forever and ever.

✘ So, when God is silent in your life, don't lose hope. Instead know with confidence that faithful believers always deal with the silence of God. Even so, when God seems quiet and still and distant, keep trusting in Him. When crosses and trials close in around you, remember that God does His best work in a wondrous silence, just as He did with His Son on the cross.

→ Remember that He works all things for your eternal good. Yes, He watched quietly as Joseph sank into the depths – but only so that He could raise Joseph up and use him to save His people from famine.

→ So, believe in all confidence and joy that through Jesus, God has saved you from your sins. In the quiet splash of your Baptism; in the preaching of His promises; with His body and blood, God is at work for your eternal good and for the salvation of every one of His beloved, redeemed children; for the blessing of every brother and every sister of our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.